

TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE: ADDRESSING
YOUNG CHILDREN AND THE CHANGING CLIMATE—
PROMISING EXAMPLES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper provides a brief overview of the risks and potential of early childhood and the changing climate and showcases a dozen innovative approaches where early childhood and climate sectors have successfully converged. Examples span research and evidence generation to national and community planning and to programmatic innovation. Across the examples, we are seeing increased capacity and commitment to promote cross-sectoral partnerships that can strengthen climate resilience, build public awareness, and promote healthy child development.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and not of the Collaborative on Global Children’s Issues or Georgetown University.

As climate change accelerates across the globe, two critical dimensions remain largely overlooked in policy, financing, and action: its profound impact on young children and the equally significant transformative potential of child-centered, climate-sensitive strategies.¹ With nearly half the world's children living in regions facing extreme climate risks, this omission threatens not only our youngest generation but fundamentally undermines our collective resilience and threatens the hard-won progress on sustainable development goals worldwide.²

To fully grasp the necessity of prioritizing young children within climate responses, it is essential to recognize their unique vulnerabilities and extraordinary potential. Young children, especially those under five, occupy a distinct and critical phase of human development. During these foundational years, rapid brain development and physical growth are acutely sensitive to environmental disruptions, meaning that climate-related stressors can trigger detrimental effects cascading throughout their lifetimes.³ Yet, paradoxically, this critical developmental window simultaneously presents an unmatched opportunity for effective intervention and meaningful adaptation. Studies demonstrate that investing in quality early childhood development programs can produce economic and social benefits.⁴

The economic case for investing in climate-responsive early childhood programs is further strengthened by the extensive reach of existing delivery systems that span health, education, social protection, and family support services. Early childhood practitioners already connect with millions of young children and their caregivers worldwide, including those in the most climate-vulnerable communities. By climate-proofing these established systems, we can simultaneously address the immediate harmful impacts of climate change on children while also building long-term, whole-community adaptive capacity, creating an efficient, dual-benefit approach to climate action.

This paper provides a brief overview of the risks and potential of early childhood and the changing climate and showcases a dozen innovative approaches where early childhood and climate sectors have successfully converged. Examples span research and evidence generation to national and community planning and to programmatic innovation. Across the examples, we are seeing increased capacity and commitment to promote cross-sectoral partnerships that can strengthen climate resilience, build public awareness, and promote healthy child development.

Ultimately, centering early childhood development within climate action is an ethical imperative as much as a strategic investment with transformative potential. Protecting children in their earliest and most formative years from climate-induced adversity not only safeguards vulnerable populations but also enhances adaptive capacities at the community level. The evidence is clear: child-centered climate responses represent a powerful pathway to achieving more equitable, resilient, and sustainable societies capable of effectively navigating the unprecedented challenges ahead.

YOUNG CHILDREN AND A CHANGING CLIMATE: DEVELOPMENTAL RISKS AND POTENTIAL PATHWAY FOR CHANGE

While all children are disproportionately vulnerable to climate hazards compared to adults, those in their earliest years, particularly under age five, face uniquely severe and multidimensional risks. This stratified vulnerability arises from multiple interrelated dimensions: heightened physiological sensitivity during critical windows of development, profound relational dependence on caregivers, and systemic disruptions to supportive environments. The combination of developmental vulnerability, strained caregiving

relationships, and disrupted support systems contributes to increasing uncertainty and unpredictability that fundamentally shape how young children understand and interact with their world.⁵

Young children's physiology creates unique susceptibilities to climate-related hazards. Their faster respiratory rates increase exposure to airborne pollutants, making them more vulnerable to climate-exacerbated air quality issues.⁶ Their immature immune systems are less effective at responding to climate-driven, largely vector-borne infectious diseases, leading to higher infection rates and more severe outcomes.⁷ With still-developing thermoregulatory systems and a faster dehydration rate, they are less able to maintain safe body temperatures amid extreme heat, making them more susceptible to heat-related illness.⁸

While their physiological vulnerabilities are significant on their own, they are compounded by a second dimension of risk: the impact of climate change on the caregiving relationships that young children depend on for protection, regulation, and developmental support. Climate-induced stressors such as extreme heat, food and water insecurity, displacement, and economic instability directly diminish caregivers' physical and emotional well-being, reducing their capacity to engage in responsive, nurturing interactions.⁹

Extreme heat, for instance, imposes significant physiological and cognitive strain on adult caregivers. Elevated temperatures increase physical discomfort, reduce sleep quality, and deplete energy reserves more rapidly, resulting in heightened fatigue, irritability, and reduced emotional resilience.¹⁰ Under such stress, caregivers can become less emotionally available and responsive to their children's needs. This deterioration in caregiving responsiveness, especially between a young child and their primary caregiver, undermines young children's foundational sense of security, which can then interfere with their ability to form stable, trusting attachments crucial for emotional self-regulation and healthy social development.¹¹

Over time, exposure to inconsistent and strained caregiving elevates children's susceptibility to chronic stress and developmental challenges. These effects create cycles of vulnerability that disproportionately impact marginalized and economically disadvantaged families, who often face multiple climate stressors simultaneously with fewer resources to mitigate their impact.

Young children's unique vulnerability is further magnified when climate hazards compromise the broader systems and institutions designed to support their development and well-being. Hazards such as flooding, drought, severe storms, and heatwaves disrupt early education services, damage vital health infrastructure, and exacerbate existing inequalities related to food security and nutrition. These disruptions can sever children's access to essential services precisely during critical developmental windows.

Young children are particularly vulnerable to these system-level impacts due to their relative invisibility within institutional safety nets. While school-aged children benefit from more established identification and support mechanisms such as the formal education system, younger children often lack comparable institutional connections, a fact that is further compounded by the often decentralized, distributed nature of early care settings.¹² This gap in institutional visibility means that climate-related disruptions to early childhood services may go unrecognized and unaddressed.

As a field, early childhood development occupies a distinctive and strategic position to address climate challenges due to three inherent strengths: its multisectoral orientation, equity-focused approach, and undergirding ecological framework.

Early childhood development inherently connects various sectors, including health, education, social protection, and family services, facilitating comprehensive climate resilience actions. Its established practice of collaborating across multiple fields—from maternal and child health to education and community support—provides a foundation for effectively managing climate-driven health impacts, economic disruptions, and barriers to learning. This cross-sector coordination enables early childhood

initiatives to anticipate and proactively respond to climate risks, reinforcing the sector's capacity to effectively integrate climate adaptation strategies.

The field's inherent focus on equity places priority on the most vulnerable and marginalized children and families, precisely those who disproportionately bear the brunt of climate disruptions. This equity-driven approach mirrors climate adaptation's emphasis on directing resources and efforts toward the populations most severely impacted by climate hazards. By centering interventions on vulnerable communities, early childhood initiatives contribute significantly to ensuring socially just, inclusive, and equitable outcomes in climate resilience efforts.

Underlying these multisectoral and equity-focused strengths is a holistic ecological perspective on early childhood development. This comprehensive framework recognizes the central role of caregivers in the lives of children and the influence of the community and national and global policies on children and families. Optimal child development involves interconnected physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains—all particularly sensitive to climate disruptions. By prioritizing stable and nurturing environments, early childhood frameworks directly respond to threats posed by climate instability. Furthermore, the intergenerational and community-based nature of early childhood development (ECD) programs facilitates the transfer of traditional ecological knowledge and resilience practices between generations, empowering children, families, and communities as active participants in building resilience.

Collectively, these core strengths uniquely position ECD as a pivotal field capable of driving comprehensive, inclusive, and effective climate resilience efforts globally.

PROMISING INITIATIVES EMERGE AROUND THE WORLD

Research and Evidence Generation

1. UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE AWARENESS AMONG CAREGIVERS IN THE ARAB REGION

The Arab region faces pronounced climate vulnerabilities exacerbated by slow-onset climate hazards such as water shortages, prolonged droughts, and escalating temperatures, all of which are further compounded by conflict and political instability. Recognizing that young children under 5 years of age are particularly susceptible to these climate-related impacts and to develop targeted ways of safeguarding children's health and developmental potential, the Arab Network for Early Childhood Development (ANECD) conducted a comprehensive regional assessment across six Arab countries—Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, Jordan, Oman, and Morocco—to explore how parents and caregivers of young children perceive climate risks and adapt their caregiving practices accordingly.¹³

Through an online participatory survey with 150 caregivers per country, ANECD examined caregivers' knowledge about climate change, their understanding of potential impacts on young children's health, and their awareness of mitigation strategies. Questions also explored caregivers' daily practices concerning air quality, water, safety, food handling, and waste management to assess practical responses to climate challenges.

Initial findings highlighted varied levels of climate awareness among caregivers across the region, with Tunisia showing the highest overall awareness at 83.2%, followed by Oman (75.1%) and Lebanon (73.9%). Conversely, caregiver awareness of specific climate mitigation measures was generally moderate

to low across surveyed countries, signaling an urgent need for targeted education interventions to bridge knowledge gaps.

Daily practices such as promoting clean air, managing water safely, ensuring food quality, and engaging in waste sorting were generally well-adopted, although notable variations across the surveyed countries were observed. Moroccan caregivers, for example, showed moderate climate awareness (72.4%) and effective application of such knowledge in areas like food safety and waste management. Other areas or regions had wider asymmetry between reported awareness and daily practices, suggesting integrated interventions that combine both information and behavior support as a promising pathway forward to addressing this gap.

Based on these findings, ANECD emphasized the necessity of enhancing community education and advocating for stronger regional and international cooperation on climate issues, with specific recommendations including embedding climate education into early childhood curricula, developing disaster preparedness programs tailored for young children and families, and investing more systematically in community-level sustainable energy and resource management practice.

2. ADDRESSING AIR POLLUTION'S IMPACT ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN DELHI

India's capital, Delhi, consistently ranks among cities with the poorest air quality globally, largely due to dense urbanization, industrial activity, vehicular emissions, and poorly managed landfill sites.¹⁴ Although the country has significantly reduced its infant mortality rate in recent decades, rising respiratory illnesses among young children—whose faster breathing rates increase their intake of pollutants—potentially could undo these hard-won health gains.¹⁵

Recognizing these vulnerabilities, Mobile Creches and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC) explored the impacts of severe air pollution on children in their first 1,000 days.¹⁶ Through six focus groups of 10 to 20 mothers from densely populated, low-income neighborhoods, researchers investigated family experiences. Participants primarily worked in informal sectors (domestic work, construction, and waste segregation), where precarious employment conditions increased their direct exposure to pollution and heightened economic insecurity, significantly shaping caregiving practices. Interviews with health care providers complemented these insights by clarifying local disease patterns and care behaviors.

Findings revealed widespread respiratory infections among children, characterized by persistent coughing, nasal congestion, and breathlessness, especially during peak winter pollution months (November–February).¹⁷ Although mothers acknowledged air pollution, most did not directly connect it with their children's prolonged illnesses, attributing symptoms instead to typical childhood ailments or seasonal cold weather. This normalization of illness diminished community awareness of its seriousness. As one clinician noted, "Health issues are happening with everybody, and when it is happening with everybody, you don't perceive it to be a problem."¹⁸

Misunderstandings about disease spread and management further increased vulnerability. Mothers often mistakenly paused breastfeeding during illness due to fears of infection transmission via breast milk, and delayed vaccinations until respiratory symptoms subsided, both practices that unintentionally compromised children's immune protection. Economic pressures also drove families toward immediate symptom relief from informal providers, resulting in inappropriate and frequent antibiotic and steroid use, weakening children's immune systems, and increasing susceptibility to future health issues.

The authors recommend comprehensive, targeted solutions tailored specifically to marginalized communities. Proposed interventions include enhancing health care accessibility, community education

addressing misconceptions, subsidizing clean cooking fuels, improving sanitation and ventilation, and creating safer public spaces. Lastly, they underscore the importance of actively involving women from affected communities in climate-health policy development to ensure children's specific needs are addressed, while supporting ongoing research into the connections between air quality, socioeconomic vulnerability, and early childhood health outcomes.

3. UNDERSTANDING CAREGIVER PERCEPTIONS TO STRENGTHEN CLIMATE-RESPONSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICY IN GHANA

Ghana faces substantial climate-related challenges, including increasingly frequent cycles of severe flooding, prolonged droughts, deteriorating air quality, and population displacement triggered by environmental shocks.¹⁹ Ranked thirty-fifth globally on UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index, Ghanaian children's inherent vulnerability is significantly increased by context-specific factors, including the nation's heavy reliance on rain-fed agriculture, rapid urbanization along coastal areas, insufficient resilient infrastructure, and ongoing environmental degradation such as deforestation.²⁰ These intertwined factors collectively disrupt critical services—nutrition, health care, and education—and significantly weaken caregiving environments essential to child development.

Recognizing that detailed, community-level insights are critical for shaping effective interventions that address these compounding challenges, the Early Childhood Network Ghana (ECNG), with support from the African Early Childhood Network (AfECN), is conducting a mixed-methods study aimed at filling this critical knowledge gap.²¹ Using key informant interviews and surveys, the researchers aim to capture local caregivers' experiences and perceptions regarding climate-driven impacts on children's health, cognitive development, education, and family livelihoods. The intended sample is diverse in nature and includes parents and caregivers of children under eight, early childhood educators, health workers, and community leaders across different geographic and socioeconomic contexts.

Ultimately, the findings from this comprehensive research initiative will inform national-level advocacy and policy development, as well as community-based interventions. ECNG anticipates that the results will support targeted improvements in health and educational infrastructure, strengthen local capacities for climate adaptation, and foreground children's unique needs in national resilience strategies. By amplifying the voices of caregivers and communities most affected by climate impacts, this study provides critical evidence to guide not only immediate protective measures, but also long-term policies aimed at building lasting resilience among Ghana's youngest and most vulnerable populations.

4. INFORMING ZAMBIAN POLICY DIALOGUE BY EXPLORING THE EARLY CHILDHOOD-CLIMATE CHANGE NEXUS

In the past decade, the Government of Zambia has made significant strides toward improving early childhood development outcomes through targeted efforts across multiple dimensions of child well-being. For instance, between 2016 and 2019, investments in educational infrastructure and workforce training programs helped increase the proportion of Grade 1 learners entering school with preschool experience from approximately 30% to 37%.²² Similarly, enhancements in maternal and child health care sharply raised antenatal care coverage from 80% to 96% during the same period.²³

Yet despite these gains, climate change poses an increasingly significant threat to Zambia's progress in early childhood development. Among the most urgent concerns is the country's persistently high rate of child malnutrition, particularly stunting, which already affects nearly one in three children under five, according to the 2024 Zambia Demographic and Health Survey.²⁴ This situation is projected to worsen

as climate-related disruptions reduce agricultural productivity, decrease staple crop yields, and undermine food security, thereby intensifying the nutritional challenges already faced by young children.²⁵

To better understand how communities experience these climate impacts—and to strengthen advocacy for the inclusion of child-sensitive measures in national climate policy—the Zambia Early Childhood Development Action Network (ZECDAN), working with the University of Zambia, with the support of the Africa Early Childhood Network, surveyed 430 participants across the country about how they personally experienced climate change, as well as their perceptions regarding its effects on young children.²⁶

Complementing these findings, focus groups and key informant interviews revealed an additional critical insight: national-level programs and policies do not yet adequately reflect or respond to these widespread community concerns about climate change's impact on young children. However, Zambia's forthcoming National Multisectoral Early Childhood Development Policy and Strategic Framework offers a timely opportunity to bridge this gap. By explicitly incorporating climate-responsive measures informed by robust local evidence—such as the data gathered through this research—the Government of Zambia can better align resources, safeguard recent achievements, and build the resilience necessary to sustain early childhood progress amid a rapidly changing climate.

National and Community Policy and Planning

5. PRIORITIZING EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN MARSHALLESE NATIONAL CLIMATE POLICY

The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) is a low-lying atoll nation facing immediate threats to its existence and way of life from compounding climate-related impacts like rising sea levels, outbreaks of vector-borne diseases, water shortages, and forced displacement.²⁷ Despite contributing minimally to global greenhouse gas emissions, RMI has assumed a proactive and pioneering leadership role in climate action at the national, regional, and international levels.²⁸ Their forward-thinking approach to climate mitigation and resilience is particularly evident in the way they have embraced early childhood development as a pathway for overall community resilience, as indicated in the latest version of their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), which “recognizes the fundamental role Early Childhood Development plays in the context of socioeconomic development and climate change policies, and commits to prioritize ECD when it comes to climate change.” To that end, the NDC goes on to specify that the government “plans to...integrate ECD and climate change both at the agency and program levels,” which could have implications for funding or resource allocation.²⁹ By formally recognizing the critical link between early childhood development and climate resilience, RMI highlights the strategic importance of protecting the developmental potential of young children as essential to long-term national resilience in the face of unprecedented environmental challenges.

6. ELEVATING EARLY CHILDHOOD IN NATIONAL POLICY IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

The Dominican Republic—classified by the United Nations as a small island developing state—frequently experiences hurricanes, floods, and droughts that disrupt health systems, educational continuity, food security, and basic living conditions with particularly devastating effects on young children.³⁰ Almost all its population and economic output are in areas vulnerable to climate shocks—the risk of which is projected to increase in frequency and severity in the future—placing it among the 50 most climate vulnerable countries globally according to the 2024 WorldRiskIndex.³¹

To address these risks, UNICEF, the National Institute for Comprehensive Early Childhood Care (INAIPI), and the National Council for Climate Change and Clean Development Mechanism (CNCCMDL) have strategically collaborated to integrate early childhood considerations into national climate resilience planning, particularly in its Nationally Determined Contributions.³²

A significant milestone of this partnership was the First Forum on Climate Change and its Impact on Early Childhood held in June 2023, marking the country's first national-level convening specifically dedicated to addressing the intersection of early childhood and climate change. Bringing together key stakeholders from government, civil society, academia, private sector, and multilateral organizations, the forum culminated in robust, multisectoral recommendations outlining clear, actionable strategies to integrate child-sensitive solutions into national climate policies, including: strengthening early childhood services to withstand climate shocks, integrating climate adaptation measures into early childhood programs, and ensuring children's specific needs are addressed in emergency response protocols.

Building on this momentum, the partnership has continued to elevate the importance of early childhood development, including in international climate dialogues. In June 2024, INAIPI participated in the Sixtieth Session of the Subsidiary Body for Scientific Advice and the Subsidiary Body for Implementation (SB60) in Bonn, Germany, becoming one of the first government early childhood entities to participate in a multilateral climate forum of this magnitude, ensuring early childhood perspectives were included in the highly technical discussions that inform global climate policy.³³

In coordination with the National Council for Climate Change and institutions with expertise in early childhood, the National Climate Landscape Analysis for Children (CLAC-DR) study was conducted. The study determined that climate change in the Dominican Republic severely impacts early childhood, leading to health issues such as dehydration, heat stress, and increased disease incidence due to the vulnerability of children and pregnant women.³⁴

As the Dominican Republic prepares its updated Nationally Determined Contributions ahead of COP30, the partners continue advocating for deeper integration of early childhood considerations to strengthen the country's overall climate resilience. As an extension of this work, and by highlighting the cost-effectiveness and multiplier effects of early childhood climate investments, the collaboration has also worked to attract international climate financing, such as from the Green Climate Fund and other sources dedicated to addressing climate-related loss and damage.

7. CAPACITY BUILDING AND CROSS-SECTOR DIALOGUE AMONG EARLY CHILDHOOD STAKEHOLDERS IN BHUTAN

Nestled in the fragile eastern Himalayas, Bhutan faces escalating threats from accelerating glacier retreat, floods, landslides, and unpredictable rainfall patterns, hazards that particularly affect communities in vulnerable river valleys and are especially disruptive to children's continued access to education, health, nutrition services.³⁵ In response, ARNEC, UNICEF, and Bhutan's Ministry of Education and Skills Development brought together 36 stakeholders—including government officials, early childhood development facilitators, civil society representatives, and monastic leaders—for a two-day "Climate 101 Workshop and Consultation" in Paro, Bhutan.³⁶ Through structured dialogue, participants explored how early childhood programs and locally relevant strategies could directly support overall community resilience and national climate adaptation goals. As one participant emphasized, "Investing in young children's resilience is essential—not just for their individual futures, but for Bhutan's future as a whole."³⁷

The workshop yielded practical, targeted action plans that meet both the needs of the early childhood sector and broader climate action goals, including: developing climate-resilient early childhood facilities designed to withstand landslides and severe weather events; introducing age-appropriate climate education curricula; initiating community-based waste segregation to prevent contamination during floods; implementing water conservation education to prepare for prolonged drought conditions; and building local capacity for environmental stewardship among early childhood care providers.

This collaborative approach demonstrates how multisectoral dialogues focused on early childhood can strengthen national resilience, illustrating clearly that investments made early in life not only protect young children but also reinforce broader community capacity to withstand the growing impacts of climate change.

Through these initiatives, Bhutan has taken steps to include young children, particularly through education, in its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) submitted recently. In addition, there has been a growing demand for similar workshops in the region. For example, Nepal requested a capacity-building session for youth advocates, which was undertaken in April 2025.

8. INDEXING RISKS TO ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE IN HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS

Harris County, Texas, encompassing the greater Houston metropolitan area, faces escalating climate risks such as extreme heat, flooding, and air quality deterioration, which directly threaten early childhood development service delivery. Urban heat islands intensify extreme heat events, while recurrent flooding displaces families and disrupts childcare provision. To better understand the implications of these vulnerabilities to childcare access and operations, the [Low-Income Investment Fund](#) conducted a detailed spatial analysis, integrating FEMA's National Risk Index data with the geographic distribution of licensed childcare facilities. This method pinpointed neighborhoods where children's access to critical developmental supports is most susceptible to climate impacts.³⁸

Using advanced mapping techniques, census tracts were assessed according to climate vulnerability and childcare availability, particularly emphasizing facilities serving low-income populations receiving childcare subsidies. The analysis identified that over 104,000 childcare seats across 1,311 facilities are in areas facing disaster risks in the top 10% nationwide. Critically, facilities accepting childcare subsidies were disproportionately found in these high-risk regions, compounding vulnerability for low-income families. These insights are guiding local planning efforts by integrating climate resilience into infrastructure and disaster preparedness strategies, exemplifying how a targeted, data-driven approach can strengthen community resilience while prioritizing the needs of vulnerable young children.

Climate-Sensitive Programming and Planning

9. FOSTERING ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND APPRECIATION THROUGH NATURE-BASED PRESCHOOLS: THE NATURAL START ALLIANCE

Early childhood experiences in nature yield well-documented developmental benefits, including enhanced physical health, improved social-emotional skills, and strengthened cognitive abilities. However, equally significant—particularly in the context of climate change—is how these experiences nurture children's ecological identity and foster care and concern for nature and the environment. Regular interactions with nature from a young age establish deep connections with the natural world that increase the likelihood

of sustained environmental stewardship in adulthood. As climate change intensifies, cultivating these early relationships with nature becomes increasingly crucial, preparing children to confront an uncertain ecological future with care, creativity, and skills for action.

Recognizing this transformative potential and in response to a growing demand for outdoor preschool programs, the Natural Start Alliance, an initiative of North American Association for Environmental Education, developed the [*Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook*](#) for practitioners and educators of children from birth through age eight. The guidebook outlines essential elements of high-quality programs: immersive outdoor experiences integrated within daily routines, nature as an extension of the learning environment and a focal point for exploration, child-centered inquiry-driven curriculum design, and the development of environmental literacy through direct experiences. This last element encompasses observation and problem-solving skills, knowledge of local ecosystems, and fostering attitudes of respect and empathy for the natural world.

Implementation of these elements center around four key areas of practice:

- Teaching practices
- Environmental guidelines
- Safety practices
- Administrative practices

Programs implementing nature-based practices report improvements in children's physical activity, problem-solving abilities and family environmental behaviors. The framework has been successfully adapted across diverse settings—urban areas with limited green space, various cultural environments, and different socioeconomic conditions—demonstrating its transferability with minimal resources. By linking early childhood education with ecological sustainability, the guidebook positions nature-based preschools as critical spaces for developing both healthy learning and environmentally responsible citizens.

10. ENSURING HEALTHY AND SAFE ENVIRONMENTS: THE CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH NETWORK

The Children's Environmental Health Network (CEHN) has been the leader of the children's environmental health movement for over 30 years. Yet children still face preventable threats to their health and wellness and many families face impossible choices between their well-being and their financial security. Communities are being systemically divested from and disproportionately exposed to harmful chemicals. Climate change magnifies environmental health threats for all, but especially for children in low-income communities.

The network focuses on a number of priorities, including:

- Cleaner water and air
- Safer food
- Climate change (mitigation and adaptation)
- Toxin-free environments
- Healthier places
- Environmental justice (climate justice and health equity)
- Access to nature

One of the innovative programs of CEHN is Eco- Healthy Child Care (EHCC), which provides technical assistance, training, and resources to childcare providers on reducing environmental hazards within childcare settings. The EHCC program's goal is to identify common toxicants found within and around childcare facilities and reduce or all together prevent adverse health effects from exposures.

<https://cehn.org/>

Overall Leadership and Capacity Building

11. LEADING ON CLIMATE, ENVIRONMENT, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD: THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD NETWORK

Since 2019, ARNEC has emerged as a leading advocate for integrating early childhood development into discussions and action around climate change and environmental degradation. Recognizing the profound yet often overlooked impacts of climate change on young children, ARNEC has spearheaded efforts to build awareness, strengthen evidence, and mobilize action at both regional and global levels.

In 2020, ARNEC's publication, *ARNEC Connections*, amplified insights from early childhood experts across the Asia-Pacific region. Contributors highlighted how environmental degradation undermines early childhood development, calling explicitly for integrated, multisectoral responses that recognize environmental protection as essential for ensuring children's healthy development. The publication urged policymakers and practitioners alike to address environmental health and climate change through child-centered policies and programs.

"Nature brings numerous benefits to children's health, learning, and development; on the other hand, children's connection with nature is essential for nature itself."

"It is through experience, education, and connection that children and young people can engage with environmental and climate issues, develop green citizenship, become agents of change for the environment, and take a leading role in the socio-environmental agenda."

- Alana Institute & International Union for Conservation of Nature Commission on Education and Communication (2024)

Following this work, ARNEC partnered with UNICEF, Save the Children, and the Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN) to publish a joint global statement in 2021. This statement outlined four critical priorities designed to elevate young children's visibility in climate discourse, secure targeted investments in early childhood services, strengthen the evidence base around climate-sensitive ECD policy, and support community-led, child-focused climate actions. These priorities aimed to ensure that the youngest children—particularly those from vulnerable communities—were at the forefront of climate resilience planning and response.

Further building upon these efforts, ARNEC collaborated with UNICEF EAPRO and Save the Children to produce the groundbreaking scoping study, "Most Vulnerable to Most Valuable."³⁹ This study leveraged the Nurturing Care Framework to clearly articulate the complex connections between climate change, environmental degradation, and early childhood outcomes.⁴⁰ It underscored the immediate and long-term impacts of climate disruption on young children's health, well-being, and developmental potential. The study also provided policymakers, climate experts, and practitioners with examples of innovative, child-centered approaches to climate resilience, advocating explicitly for greater investment, informed policy, and strategic action to safeguard early childhood development amid escalating climate risks.

Through these complementary initiatives, ARNEC continues to work with partners and to strengthen the integration of early childhood considerations into climate policy and practice, emphasizing the urgent need to recognize young children as both uniquely vulnerable and uniquely valuable in the global response to climate change.

ECD and Climate Change Knowledge Hub and the ECD Climate Change Toolkit

<http://www.climate.arnec.net>

12. PARENTS AS KEY ADVOCATES FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

One of the most exciting efforts emerging around the world is the movement of parents speaking out on behalf of environmental issues. Often motivated by how climate changes and environmental hazards are already impacting their families, as well as the desire for their children to inherit a more sustainable earth, parent groups are stepping forward and speaking out. Below are just four examples:

Our Kids Climate

Our Kids Climate is based on the belief that all children today and tomorrow should inherit a healthy planet and just world, rooted in renewable energy and built through intergenerational solidarity. By connecting national and grassroots groups and supporting leaders in more than 50 countries around the world, they are developing parent-led, family friendly, and intergenerational organizing and engaging strategies.

In 2025, Our Kids Climate welcomed their fourth cohort of fellows, including 12 organizers from nine countries: Brazil, Canada, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Sweden, Uganda, the United States, and the United Kingdom. In addition to their groundbreaking fellowship, they support microgrants—small grants for parent-led efforts. In 2025, these microgrants will be focused on projects related to clean energy, clean air, and fossil fuel phaseout around the world.

<https://ourkidsclimate.org/>

Moms Clean Air Force

Moms Clean Air Force is a community of over 1.6 moms and dads united against air pollution to protect the health of children. They stand up for equitable solutions to address both air pollution and climate change. Working through a network of community organizers, they focus on both national and local level policies in the U.S. They work with legislators and other political leaders in a bipartisan way.

<https://www.momscleanairforce.org/>

EcoMadres

EcoMadres is an important part of Moms Clean Air Force. Millions of Latino families live in counties with high levels of ozone and other pollutants. EcoMadres' growing network of state-based field teams and allies help Latino communities stand up for clean air, stable climate, and protections from toxic chemicals.

<https://www.momscleanairforce.org/ecomadres/>

Warrior Moms- India

Warrior Moms is collective of mothers from all over India standing up for the rights of children to breath clean air. Their vision is to create a society where clean air, which is a basic human right, is accessible to all, especially children. They focus on creating awareness about the sources of air pollution and climate change, educating and empowering citizens to take action, and engaging decisionmakers to enforce regulations.

<https://warriormomsindia.org/>

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Early Childhood Development Action Network (ECDAN)

<https://ecdan.org/eecd-knowledge-gateway/climate-change/>

Save the Children- Born into the Climate Crises 2

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/born-into-the-climate-crisis-2-an-unprecedented-life-protecting-childrens-rights>

Partnership for a Lead-Free Future- Toolkit to end childhood lead poisoning

<https://www.leadfreefuture.org/toolkit/toolkit-end-childhood-lead-poisoning>

United Nations-General Comment No 26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change

[CRC/C/GC/26: General comment No. 26 \(2023\) on children's rights and the environment with a special focus on climate change | OHCHR](#)

UNESCO Greening Education Partnership

<https://www.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development/education/greening-future>

UNICEF - Climate change and the environment, a livable planet for every child

<https://www.unicef.org/environment-and-climate-change>

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT THE COLLABORATIVE

The university-wide Collaborative on Global Children's Issues fosters cross-disciplinary research and dialogue on critical and emerging global children's issues, with a particular focus on children in adversity and pathways to resilience.

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